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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000058

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

USDOC for 6500 and 4431/MAC/AP/OPB/VLC/HPPHO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [KPAO](#) [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [VM](#) [AFLU](#)

SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: FRESH OUTBREAK IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

REF: 04 HO CHI MINH CITY 001258

1. (U) SUMMARY: Since the end of December 2004, Vietnam's southern provinces have experienced a renewed outbreak of avian flu. Southern provincial authorities have issued a ban on the transport of poultry and poultry products within and out of disease-stricken areas. Chicken is disappearing from local menus and markets, though the availability and popularity of eggs so far remains unchanged. Local media reports on the outbreak have been timely and widespread, significantly raising public awareness about this most recent outbreak of avian flu. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) In the past two weeks, Vietnamese doctors have confirmed five people have died from becoming infected with the H5N1 virus, with three other possible cases waiting to be confirmed. A total of 16 have been hospitalized as suspected cases, all within southern Vietnam. The Animal Health Department reported on January 16 that a total of 67,038 chickens, 68,203 ducks and geese, and 98,750 quail have been culled or died of avian flu in southern Vietnam.

3. (SBU) Since December 26, 2004, major news dailies based in Ho Chi Minh City have been reporting prominently on the fresh outbreak of avian flu (H5N1) in Vietnam. The papers have given the story front page, above-the-fold coverage, with more detailed stories continuing on page three. Leading papers covering the story include the Communist Party paper of HCMC 'Saigon Giaiphong' ('Saigon Liberation'), 'Nguoi Lao Dong' ('The Worker') and 'Tuoi Tre' ('Youth'), the highest circulation general interest daily in the nation. Vietnamese reporters, who tend to err on the side of caution in reporting health crises, appear to be building on their experience with the first avian flu outbreak in 2004. The reporting is more detailed, analytical and avoids inclusion of more sensational comments from outside observers. To date, this reporting seems to have achieved partial, if not complete, success in raising awareness of avian flu.

4. (SBU) Often with accompanying photos, coverage has been both factual and analytical. For example, "The Worker" reported that the transport of poultry on passenger buses from the Mekong Delta region to HCMC would increase the risk of the spread of bird flu. After this report, transporting poultry in passenger cars was banned. Newspapers have conducted interviews with local Vietnamese health officials and veterinarians highlighting the risks, seeking to raise public awareness of the disease. Southern provincial authorities have since issued a ban on the transport and trade of poultry and poultry products within or out of the 18 provinces in the Mekong Delta affected by avian flu. Additionally, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai issued a directive this week to temporarily ban all imported poultry and poultry products from neighboring countries.

5. (SBU) A sure sign that public awareness is on the rise is the decline in chicken prices and the disappearance of poultry from many menus. According to a local caterer, poultry prices have been dropping since early January. The price of poultry in December was VND27,300/kg, falling to VND25,500/kg by the second week of January. Customer orders for chicken declined significantly by the second week of January and school cafeterias dropped orders for chicken completely. Starting next week, the caterer will not offer chicken at all due to declining demand and for reasons of safety. One local expatriate grocer told EconOff that she has not noted any change in either supply or price of poultry since the most recent avian flu outbreak. However, this grocer sources all of her poultry locally through one supplier, and the grocer admitted she was unsure how long her supplier would be

able to meet the even lower levels of demand.

16. (SBU) Comparatively, the past week and a half has seen an increase in prices for other types of meat, according to local contacts. The most notable increase has been in the price of fish, a ready substitute for chicken. Mackerel prices have risen from VND24,000/kg to VND30,000/kg and tuna from VND12,000/kg to VND16,000/kg. Pork has also seen a moderate price increase, with pork ribs increasing from VND36,000/kg to VND40,000/kg and lean cuts of pork from VND32,000/kg to VND35,000/kg. Beef prices continue to remain stable. Current events do not appear to have had an effect on egg prices or consumption levels.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Vietnam will continue to struggle with avian flu, which will directly affect the stability of local poultry markets. The swiftness of this most recent outbreak highlights the potential for Vietnam to import U.S. poultry products to meet local demand, especially given the recent ban on poultry from neighboring countries. The current decline in poultry demand is significant as Vietnam approaches the lunar new year holiday, where chicken dishes traditionally figure prominently in new year celebrations. END COMMENT.

WINNICK